Influences on Health

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In Bang Chan, a discussion of sickness and health merely in terms of element balance would be true but insufficient, or even superficial. After all, whether manipulated by oneself or by a professional curer, elements could only be controlled within certain limits. Far deeper questions were posed, probing the ultimate nature of health, life, and death. What determined the particular proportions of a person's 4 elements with which he had been born, and whether he had, say, a preponderance of wood from Jupiter or gold from Venus? The immediate answer of astrological confluences on the date of birth would be true, for each day had its own qualities and aspects, but it was not enough. Why had he been born on that date to that set of governing factors? In life, why did one person meet the circumstances that created illness, while another lived in glorious health? The answers to these questions must be sought in the Buddhist moral and cosmic beliefs.

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The Buddhist universe operated on a principle of immutable law. Each person received his just due, suffering for his own sins, enjoying reward for his virtue. There was no personified deity to help, forgive, or blame. Moreover, attachments were the cause of sorrow. Because existence was fraught with desires, all life was basically painful. Even flashes of happiness by their cessation caused sorrow.

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In this universe and on this earth, individuals, each a unique and independent entity, were born to live and die, over and over again, throughout eons of time. They bore no relation to each other. Separate and autonomous, each was in charge of his own destiny. All beings formed a single grand scale of existence from demons in hell, through such lowly creatures as worms and insects, upward through dogs, cats, buffaloes, and elephants to mankind, then on up to angels and gods in the last paradises before the peace of Nipphān (Nirvana).

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The insight of the Buddha showed the way to break the sorrowful eternal cycle of rebirth and reach Nipphān. The Buddha perceived that meritorious behavior caused one to progress up this ladder of existence toward freedom from incarnation. In each life merit (bun) could be accumulated by compassionate behavior: caring for priests, and being kind and generous to persons less able to care for themselves. With merit one's next life was happier and freer of restrictions. A dog had more merit than a worm, a buffalo than a dog.

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759 sought, ritually requested of some relative who was a mid-
571 wife.[70] Some persons though continued to limit themselves
602 to delivering their relatives, and never sought magic at all.

Two Worlds: The Natural and the Supernatural

759 To deliver a baby as a midwife or even as an unskill-
• 772 ed kinsman, embraced 2 aspects: a manual or technical, and a magical. These aspects corresponded to Bang Chan's 2 great worlds of knowledge and experience: the natural and the supernatural.

Midwifery was not alone in embracing both of those categories. Every activity, bus-driving, dancing, printing, or other, had its incorporated magical means to augment the probability of success. Though with the manual or technical skills of the natural world alone one could come through all right with even a modicum of supernatural help, success was greater. No one wanted to take the responsibility and risks of "going it alone" especially when the resources of the supernatural world were so freely and easily accessible to everyone. At the very least, one could start an enterprise on Friday (Wan Suk: Happy Day). The closer an enterprise was to the margin of life and death, however, the larger the supernatural element. In farming, curing, and midwifery, for instance, the ritual component was strong.

[874] Since these 2 worlds were qualitatively different, each required a different method of learning. The supernatural world, immaterial, royal and sacred, was learned

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[789] 70. Three women had recieved theirs from their mother, mother's mother, and mother's older brother, respectively. A retired midwife planned to give hers "to the daughter or grandchild ("lan":sex not specified) who was interested enough to ask for it." One man had received his from his father's father. Childbirth magic would hardly be a suitable topic of conversation between priests, but it might have been passed down there, too. The midwife whom one accompanied while learning probably was the source of one's magic. Women's magic was passed down the maternal line only, whereas men could get theirs both from kinsmen and at the temple.

by instruction from a ritually[71] approached teacher. "One cannot accidentally learn. One has to ask to be taught." As a practitioner in this field, the title "mɔ̄" signalized expertise; where teaching was involved, the title was khrū (teacher [McF. 183]) or ājhān (professor [McF.998]). Speech was the key to this tradition, in spite of sacred books and wall-carvings in the temples.[72] Modern education, being book-and-teacher based, shared in this aura. There, even today, listening is more comfortable than reading.

Techniques of the practical, natural world were learned not by teaching but pragmatically by observation, example and experience. Eyes were the key. "I know because I saw," said a midwife. At the highest level of achievement in the natural world one was expert (nak), e.g. convict (nak thōt, an expert in being punished) a tourist (nak thīao, an expert in roaming around).[73] Within the natural world, an intense pragmatism reigned always emphasizing visual phenomena. People were keenly

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71. To speak ritually one held in the hand the trio of incense, flowers, and a candle. This was the way to cross over from the profane to the sacred world, to inform (bɔ̄k) or make a request of, a sacred being (a teacher, priest, king, or deity). The tiny flame of the offering invoked holy fire, and so had the effect of making one's words compelling, for no one could gainsay a request under such circumstances. A husband about to deliver his wife held incense, flower, and candle in hand as he requested the help of ancestors and spirits. (Bishop Pallegoix saved the existence of his mission by thus approaching the King [Pallegoix, Vol. 2:201]). The trio of offerings, whether at the 4 corners of the lying-in fire-floor, or in "hat phlī krathong" at a "thaa khwan" rite, or even in an ordinary khwan thao made all actions and words compelling.

72. Because words, immaterial and invisable, lay at the base of occultism, words as continuous agents of power permeated Bang Chan's ordinary daily life. This was why words, verbal play, and punning initiated action: pregnant women attended the monks' "coming out of retreat" (ɔ̀k phansā) so that the child would "come out" (ɔ̀k) easily.

73. It should not be forgotten that most activities in the supernatural world had their technical sides, and the term "nak" was used there too. A curer had to learn his herbs; a dancer, his steps; and a master of ceremonies, the words of the chants.

4:Phillips E-4,5 (1956-1957) 1966
AO7 Central Thai AO7
Bang Chan
Thailand AO1

whole, depends in large part on one's frame of reference.[2] In the most general terms, the people of Bang Chan are like almost all ethnic Thai peasants (excepting on some counts Thai Moslems and some of the economically disenfranchised people of the Northeast) in that they have a keen sense of membership in the nation-state with a deep loyalty to the Crown, speak the Thai language, are Therevada Buddhists, are outwardly highly deferential to the authority of the Central government, and have a conception of the good life that stresses fun, physical comfort and security, intellectual simplicity and practicality, and a moral (as contrasted with a natural) ordering of the universe. Too, like the vast majority of their rural compatriots,[3] they are engaged in the production of rice, an activity which to them is not only an economic operation (Ingram 1955, Janlekha 1955) but almost a way of life, being bound up with their social structure, dietary habits, religious practices, and even their philosophical (J. R. Hanks 1961) and aesthetic conceptions.

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[2] For readers unfamiliar with Thailand, the nation-state, it should be noted that the country is predominantly rural; 84 percent of the total national labor force is in agriculture and there are only ten towns with populations of 20,000 people or more, in which 6 percent of the national population (1947 census) live. Although Bangkok has a population of approximately 1,200,000, the second largest city, Chiengmai, has only 60,000 (1957 estimate).

The nation also has a high degree of ethnic homogeneity, 82 percent of the population considering themselves native Thai (1957 estimate). The largest ethnic minority group is the overseas Chinese, comprising 11.3 percent of the population (1953 estimate, from Skinner 1957), the balance being Malays, Cambodians, and Indians; the so-called tribal groups number in toto only about 150,000 people.

The religious composition of the country is 94.1 percent Buddhist, 3.9 percent Moslem, 0.5 percent Christian, and 1.5 percent "others," many of whom are tribal animists. Thai Buddhism is of the Southern (Therevada, Hinayana, or "Lesser Vehicle") variety and as practiced by most Thai, has syncretized within it many Brahmanic and traditional Southeast Asian animistic elements (see the chapter on "Religion" in Sharp *et al.* 1956, and Textor 1960). The largest minority religion, Islam, is practiced by ethnic Malay living in the four southernmost provinces of Thailand, as well as by some ethnic Thai—many of them descendants of former Malay slaves or war prisoners—scattered through the areas north and east of Bangkok, including Bang Chan, where they comprise 9.8 percent of the local population. Relationships between Buddhists and Moslems, at least in Bang Chan, are quite amicable and except for ideal prohibitions against intermarriage and occasional offhand remarks such as "Moslem women are loose" or "Moslems kill animals," there is little overt hostility between the two groups. Certainly few Bang Chaners ever distinguish between their Buddhist and Moslem neighbors when arranging a work group, selecting a drinking partner, or even compiling a guest list for a son's ordination.

[3] Janlekha (in Sharp *et al.* 1953: 110) indicates that 55 percent of the total national labor force is involved *solely* in the cultivation of rice—which occupies approximately 90 percent of the total cultivated land area—and as many as 92 percent of all agricultural households are rice households. The 55 percent figure excludes all those people who are involved in the transportation, milling, storing, and distribution of rice. Eighty-five percent of the population of Bang Chan (1953) are rice farmers.

4:Phillips E-4,5 (1956-1957) 1966
AO7 Central Thai AO7
Bang Chan

These assumptions about the indeterminate nature of the universe and human actions are so integral to the villagers' cognitive orientations that Bang Chaners often hesitate to make even the most elementary kinds of prediction. Thus, in asking a village lad how he felt about his older brother's forthcoming ordination, I was told, "I don't know." The tone of his reply indicated that he was not evading the question, so I pursued the matter further: "Well, do you feel happy about it? Do you wish you were being ordained together with him?" He answered: "The ordination is not for another three days. I do not know how I will feel at that time. But when that time comes I will know." In another case, I was going up the canal with a villager to attend a "Kathin" being held at the monastery. (A "Kathin" is a fiesta-like merit making ceremony sponsored by a person or group of persons from outside the village at which new robes are presented to the monastery monks. It involves the sponsors, their local hosts, and all villagers who wish to attend.) Although not necessarily an annual event, "Kathins" are held often enough at Monastery Bang Chan so that this villager, who was also a member of the monastery lay committee, was thoroughly familiar with every aspect of them. Simply to make conversation, I asked him: "What is the 'Kathin' going to be like today?" to which he replied, "I do not know. I have not been to the monastery yet today." Assuming that his past experience with "Kathins" provided him with some knowledge of the goings-on, I went on: "Well, do you think there will be many people?" His answer: "I do not know. You never know what a situation is like until you meet it. I have not met this one yet today."

The point of these various illustrations is that they represent a psychological universe of uncertainty and unpredictability. And in this kind of universe—where one hesitates to build up sharply defined expectations and where one is forever aware of the mutability and frailty of the environment—it is not unusual that there should also be a high tolerance for interpersonal nonconformity. What the actual limits are, theoretical or empirical, to this tendency to nonconformity are uncertain. Much of the nonconformity is undoubtedly made possible, in the first instance, by the sociologically simple and relatively undifferentiated nature of Bang Chan society; that is, the actual number of functionally specific tasks and roles—those that require special competencies—are few, and any number of different individuals can perform them. Thus, when a Bang Chan employee walks out on his boss or when a wife walks out on her husband, their actions do not from a functional point of view disable the system. Since the requirements of the role of house servant or farmhand are characteristically simple and understood by all, the departing employee can usually be replaced by another individual. Similarly, since any adult—aunt, grandparents, older sibling—can and often does rear another's children, and